

slivers on the rafters!"

"Where d'yeh want'm, Barney, butts forward er heads behind?"

"Say, you bandcutter-man, better git a baseball cage."

"Oh wait till we start rollin' down this barley—somebody'll git barley-beards the wrong way down his gizzard."

"But honest Injun, Charlie," said one with stage emphasis, surveying the entire barnful, "this here barn is too full fer utterance."

By this time Tomkins had the belt flapping. It was a marvelous morning. Probably nobody enjoyed that threshing day as much as I did. I could see the whole business. Every time I hauled a stone-boat load of old rails I could see how the quartette in the mow were tearing holes in the barley aloft. When I drove the old mare to the house well for a fresh barrel of water I could see how the old patriarchs of Cy in the strawstack gang were laying out for a day's work. Cy always believed in taking his own rakers, because it was the dirtiest job at a threshing; and furthermore, I knew that he had an extra eye to business. At the head of the rakers was the only place a man could see when a grain of wheat a minute was coming up in the chaff. And Cy intended to observe those now-and-then grains of wheat.

At the noon spell everybody forked food into himself with as much gusto as he had forked sheaves and straw at the barn. Bill himself and his partner Pete consumed fried pork, roast beef, potatoes, turnips, pickled beets, chowchow, home-made fresh bread, newly-churned butter, apple-sauce, pumpkin pie, apple-pie, cookies, and each three slathering cups of tea—I say they consumed these things one and all table d'hote, a la carte and carte blanche right down the list like a pair of cobras, and I listened to the clack of the gang without a word of comment.

While the rest of the outfit were assimilating pie Bill and Pete were out at the machine. Pete took a scurry over the separator, oiling up and scrutinizing the riddles and the rakers and the bearings of the cylinder, peering down into the teeth of the thing to see if she was good and hungry for the afternoon's work. Bill flung in wood and gave his whistle a couple of short, sharp poops.

"Keep y'r shirt awn, Bill," I heard Cy growl.

At a quarter to one sheaves were going through before Cy, having his hogs to feed, managed to crawl up to his post of censorship at the rakers. Bill was getting tuned up. He knew by the music of the machine whether the grain was tough, if it had weeds, whether the sheaves were well bound and pretty much of a size.

Down till four o'clock the engineer grumbled very little. He liked my nice dry rails and the soft water that never foamed in the boiler.

"Oh," says I, proudly, every now and then. "Cy Pincher knows how to arrange things. Cy's a good old head."

"Yup," said Bill, as he flung open the roaring fire-way door. "He is that."

"And just as like as not he'll pay you cash on the nail the minute you're done the job."

"Oh—he's got the long green, has he?"

"Sure Mike. We sold a steer last week."

That seemed to make Bill beam more than usual, so much so that when Cy rammied his fork-handle into the rakers and threw off the drive-belt, he said nothing more sarcastic than,

"Dog-gone your old pelt! What in the Sam Hill—?"

In the silence of the barn, as Bill stopped the engine, came the uncompromising squeak of the old man's voice:

"Y're—throwin'—over—wheat—here."

"He's a darned old liar," said Bill, as he helped Pete put on the belt again. "All the wheat we're throwin' on that stack Cy Pincher c'd put in 'is eye."

"Yes," says I, "but it takes a lot to fill Cy's eye sometimes."

When the whistle blew for supper, Tomkins took a stroll into the barn. He explored the wheat mow over the hay. I could hear him rustling about there like a lone cow at a strawstack. When he came out to go to supper I observed a hostile glimmer in his eyes. Bill spoke never a word at supper-table. He just ate like a horse. And he was usually the jolliest old coon in any threshing gang.

Cy kept watching him. He knew that Bill had fathomed his scheme. The sheaf-gang knew also. They had suspected all along there was something in the wind besides the dust.

Just as the hands were getting back to the strawstack and the mow, and Bill had fired up ready to start, Cy and the engineer confronted each other near the engine.

"Cy," says Tomkins, "there's a half a day's work in that job yit."

"How so?" growled Cyrus.

"You know it. Look at the strawstack. Why ain't you drawin' it in faster?"

"Oh she's goin' een fast enough."

"Darn your hide, you tol' me that mow was all hay half up to the beam," denoted Bill.

"I said no sech a durn-fool thing," insisted Cy. "I merely hists the lantern and says, says I, 'There's the hay.' You says, 'So I see—must a' hed a thunderin' crop o' hay.' And I says, 'It wuz the biggest crop o' hay I ever had.' But I never tol' you the hay filled half o' that mow. You jumped at the idee like a big green bass to a worm on a hook."

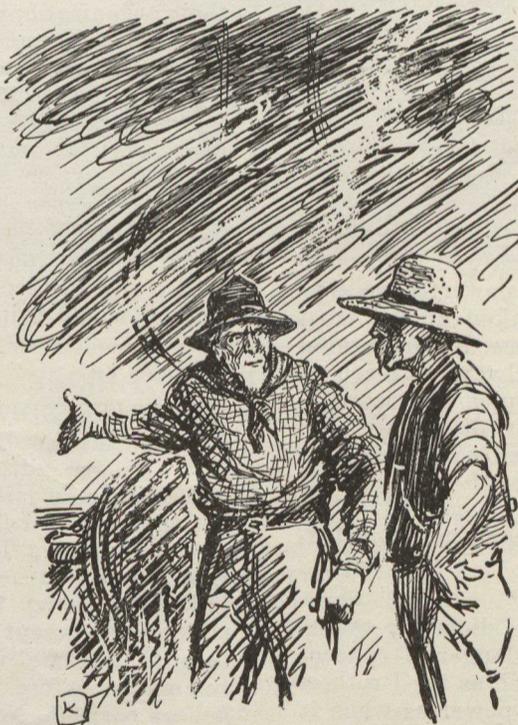
Bill was so angry he just started the engine to drown his words. The machine roared again. He said half at me as he whanged rails into the firebox,

"By ginger, the rest o' that wheat's goin' inta that separator hell bent fer 'lection."

HE held a confab with Pete, solemnly agreeing to put that wheat through before the gang quit. Bill was to take turn-about at the feeding. The fun commenced when Pete took his next shift at the cylinder. From the glare of his orbs at the sheaf-gang they knew that it was now or never. The mow became literally a live thing. The sheaves leaped out of it like a flock of sheep over a fence-rail. They buried the band-cutter and made a geysir of straw round about Pete, who had the knack of cramming the maw of that machine at double speed without choking the cylinder—though once in a while from some thundering big sheaf bound by Cy from a fence cradle-swath round a stump the separator gagged and groaned and slowed down.

Not a peep came from Cyrus at the rakers, away up there above the roof of the barn grimly heaving the straw that came up at him in a sea. And I knew that if so much as a grain of wheat a minute clipped him on the overalls he would have stopped the machine. But it was a fine separator, Pete and Bill were the two greatest feeders in Jericholand, and Cy's wheat was in prime condition. The threshers had all the odds on them. And when wall-eyed Bill got up to feed and Pete came down in the dusk like a god of grime for a suck at the water pail the mowmen were down behind the hay and the evening was closing in.

The tussle became to me at the engine now a struggle of supermen. Never had there been such a threshing contract in that settlement. Bill Tomkins said never a word now to me. He handled that engine as though it had been a siege gun. He rammied



"Durn your hide! you tol' me that hay went half way up to the beam."

"I said no sich a fool thing. I holds up the lantern and I says, says I, 'There's the hay.' 'Yes,' says you, 'must had a thunderin' crop.' 'I hed a as big a crop o' hay as ever I had,' says I. And you bit like a big green bass on to a worm."

in wood and kept the water gauge well up in the glass, let off steam now and then and kept the pressure in the gauge up around the 100 mark as steady as a town clock.

It was to me one of the great, sublime moments in life, when men fling themselves into sacrifice for the sake of principle. Looking at it in the light of experience, I know now that old Cy Pincher was a

cold-blooded old crawfish that was doing his best to jew Tomkins out of a few dollars; and that Bill and Pete were a pair of rambunking roughnecks who would have jammed Pincher's wheat through butts first without regard to how much grain went out on the stack if Cy didn't watch them. But that wasn't the way I felt about it, as I leaned on the water-barrel by the engine. To me Cy was a clever, audacious old crank who deserved to beat Tomkins if he could, and Bill was an honest great thresherman who was entitled to do the same to Cy. For the sake of Bill all the sheaf-men would have kept at it till the last sheaf was rammed through. For the sake of Cy even those rheumatic old heads of families on the strawstack would stick to it till midnight if need be.

That spirit of self-obliteration was the great thing. The men themselves made it so. They were a glorified pack of great performers whose efforts to do the big thing made the throb of the old engine and the raucous roar of the big separator sound like the music of the spheres. Whenever Bill or Pete got up to feed they seemed like great artists who could never make a slip. Either of them could have fed that separator blindfolded. Each of them knew the sound of good threshing, as great singers know their songs. All that spoiled my perfect joy in the epic was the fact that I had nothing to do but keep hauling water, for there was now plenty of wood to finish the job. Every time Bill came down from the machine he was covered with the grime of godhood to me. I know he was a commonplace old spoonendyke. I thought then he was a hero. Pete was another. The men in the shadows of the mow were all heroes; the man carrying boxes, the old patriarchs on the straw, the dry old skinflint at the rakers away up there at the peak of a mighty strawstack in the moonlight, shuffling at the straw—yes, even the engine and the separator themselves were great, superhumanized beings that should have been sung about in Homeric legends.

Suddenly there was a wildcat whoop from the dust of the dusky barn where the mowmen worked by the glimmer of the moon through the cracks.

"By jingo," I gasped, to old Bill, "they've got that barn empty."

I whooped for joy as I saw them come out of the dust, saw somebody heave a ladder to the wheat-stack outside, three young panthers covered with dust clean to the last lobe of their lungs go skylarking up to the peak as fresh as a young bull moose in the dew of the dawn. One stayed on the bridge to pitch on the table. Down came the sheaves in the light of the moon—whop-whop on to the bridge. In went more rails rammed into the fire-box; more sparks flew from the smokestack; the engine shook and the belt whistled and the big separator sang like the sons of the morning.

"Oh, Lord!" said I to myself. "I'm nothing but a bump on a log. Great Jerusalem!"

AMID all the magic I was miserable. I was unfit to be counted. I was nothing but a hewer of wood and a drawer of water. I knew now that Bill Tomkins was going to finish the job and that old Cy Pincher had determined to keep his face closed and let him, even though he flung away three bushels of wheat in the chaff for the cows to eat.

Maybe the stack was half chewed up by the machine when I crept away from the engine round to the barnyard where the strawstack towered up in the moonlight like a strange new pyramid with five men at the peak and one little old cur-mudgeon grimly swallowing dust down at the rakers as he shoved up the straw from his overalls. They were all so high up that they seemed in another world. But I had somewhat to say to Cyrus and I must do it.

I hustled back to the other side of the barn and got the long ladder. Feeling like a fine young fool I heaved it up to the barn side of the strawstack and went crawling up to within three feet of where I could just make out old Cy in his glorified cloud of dust at the rakers. It seemed like sacrilege to interrupt him, but his goggles were turned my way.

"Mr. Pincher," I shouted, not daring to call him Cy, as I usually did. "What'll I tell'm at the house."

Then I heard the old skinflint's voice croak through the dust as he missed never a forkful to the peak.

"Tell the old woman and the gals to git this gang the doggastedest supper they ever put on the table."

Which was the very thing I wanted him to say. I ran to the house like a collie dog after the cows. The women thought I was crazy, but they all agreed it was a great idea. I helped them what little I could; then I hustled back to the engine, hauled my last barrel of water, turned the old mare out to pasture, and stood leaning on the barrel to watch the last shank of the wheat-stack slide up into the maw of the separator.